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Alliances Still Matter: The Importance of Coalition Warfare in a Unipolar World

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Alliances Still Matter: The Importance of Coalition Warfare in a Unipolar World

"The only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them"

Winston Churchill

"And to the extent they are able to participate -- in the event that the president decides to use force -- that would obviously be welcomed. To the extent they're not, there are work-arounds and they would not be involved, at least in that phase."

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, on British participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The rapid advance of U.S. military forces in Iraq and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime appear to have vindicated those who argued that the United States could have conducted this military campaign unilaterally. While the United Kingdom did contribute military forces that performed important missions in southern Iraq, it is clear that "work-arounds" could have been found to make up for the absence of these units, had that been necessary. The other members of the so-called "Coalition of the Willing" were of little value to the war-fighting effort.¹ Some senior officials in or close to the Administration have already advocated the Iraqi Freedom approach as a template for future military strategy under a "preemption-based" national security policy.² This would permit US forces to act swiftly, decisively, and if necessary unilaterally to eliminate perceived threats, without the compromises, delays, and inefficiencies needed to assemble an effective warfighting coalition.

But consigning military alliances and international institutions to the sidelines and duplicating Operation Iraqi Freedom elsewhere in the world would be a serious mistake. There are sound military and strategic reasons to fight with a real coalition of allies, instead of an ad-hoc and largely political one. Warfare should not be treated as a global "pick-up" game where

the United States will take allies wherever it can find them, or "play alone" if necessary. To do otherwise runs the risk of overextending and exhausting US forces, and diminishing US influence around the world. Real coalition warfare will impose some constraints on the exercise of US military power, but the benefits outweigh these costs. Both current and historical examples illustrate the truth of Churchill's words on "fighting with allies."

The Spectrum of Conflict

The United States has no peer when it comes to warfighting ability and sheer military power. Neither the NATO allies, nor the Russians, nor the Chinese can match the capabilities of the US armed forces, especially the ability to project power across the globe. None of these countries could hope to accomplish an operation like Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The Europeans bungled the Bosnian crisis in the mid-nineties under a UN banner. Russia is still mired in a bitter internal war in Chechnya. The Chinese sought to "teach Vietnam a lesson" in 1979 but learned a few things themselves in that short, sharp border conflict. In contrast, it was primarily US airpower that forced Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic to capitulate after a 78-day campaign. US Special Forces played a vital role in rapidly undermining Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and the US military was the key component in both Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. There is little that allies could contribute to further enhance the combat power of US military forces.

The destruction of an enemy's military forces is only a portion of the entire spectrum of conflict, however. The occupation, pacification, and reconstruction of nations or regions also require a significant commitment of military resources. Peacekeeping and humanitarian operations frequently impose similar demands over long periods of time. It is in these areas that

an effective coalition can provide vital support to help achieve US objectives. Without such assistance, the United States faces a much greater risk of global overcommitment and blunting the sharp edge of its combat power.

Win, Win, Win, Win, Win, Lose?³

Every release from the US Central Command during Operation Iraqi Freedom has begun with the words: "coalition forces." Yet, with the exception of the British and possibly the Australians, the coalition has furnished very little to the military effort. A look at the composition of this coalition reveals why. Countries like Albania, Estonia, Eritrea and Palau have little or no capacity to contribute funds or personnel to the occupation or reconstruction of Iraq.⁴ The few nations in the coalition that are in a position to provide some postwar assistance, such as Japan and Italy, have indicated that they want the United Nations to play a leading role in the reconstruction of Iraq, contrary to the Administration's wishes. Most of America's NATO allies, led by France and Germany, have made similar demands, as has Russia. Even the World Bank stated that a UN resolution legitimizing a new authority in Baghdad was necessary for it to consider assistance programs - a stance that US Treasury Secretary John Snow described as "baffling."⁵

Unless the Bush Administration changes its position and accommodates a major role for the United Nations - something it has steadfastly rejected, the United States could find itself occupying Iraq largely on its own for an undetermined length of time, as well as financing the lion's share of the country's reconstruction effort. This is where the lack of an effective coalition will become painfully apparent, especially in contrast to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, where allies

contributed both forces and funds to the campaign, offsetting the cost of the conflict to a large extent.⁶

Supporters of a US-led occupation believe that an interim Iraqi government can be organized relatively quickly to administer the country, and oil exports used to finance reconstruction and development efforts. They may be right, but history offers many reasons to be cautious of such optimistic scenarios. The different tribes and ethnic groups in Iraq have never experienced true democracy before and many have long-term scores to settle among themselves. Serious conflict among ethnic groups would greatly complicate and slow the reconstruction effort and necessitate the presence of a substantial number of US troops. In Bosnia, for example, even though the shooting war among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims has been stopped by the presence of a large foreign military force, the enmity and mistrust among the three ethnic groups is a continuing problem.⁷

Reliance on Iraq's oil reserves to finance reconstruction may also prove to be an illusory hope, at least in the short term. The oil fields will require a substantial and sustained flow of new investment over a period of several years in order to increase production according to UN and World Bank experts. Current oil revenues are earmarked principally for the "oil for food" program and war reparations, and are completely inadequate to fund a reconstruction program that could amount to \$100 billion.⁸ Absent international assistance, the US taxpayer will have to foot this bill.

How much time and how many troops will be involved in the stabilization of Iraq? Predictions vary but that of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is probably the most optimistic at about six months - a bit more than the time it took to organize the autonomous Kurdish zone in northern Iraq in 1991.⁹ Estimates of troop needs also differ widely, with Army

Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki's call for "several hundred thousand soldiers" roundly criticized by Wolfowitz as being "way off the mark."¹⁰ Once again, history advises caution in this area. President Clinton's 1995 statement that US forces would leave Bosnia in "about one year" must seem ironic to the soldiers still deployed in that Balkan country eight years later.¹¹ US forces show no signs of leaving Afghanistan any time soon, and looking back at earlier conflicts, substantial forces remain in South Korea, Germany, and Japan. While the rationales differ, the foreign deployments do have a tendency to last much longer than originally anticipated.

The presence in Iraq of a significant US force for an undetermined length of time has serious implications for US military strategists, especially in view of the many other global challenges that must be confronted. Units and funds devoted to Iraq would not be available for other important missions, which are likely to increase in number if the Administration vigorously pursues a policy of preemption. Lengthy occupation duties would sap the combat power of military units, and additional unilateral or ad-hoc coalition operations elsewhere in the world could stretch military resources close to a breaking point. More military successes would bring additional requirements for occupation forces and reconstruction financing, further diluting American combat power.¹² US economic and human resources would be adequate for this task, if the American people are willing to make the substantial and sustained sacrifices necessary to support such a policy. Whether or not a return to the draft might be required remains a source of debate, even though the Secretary of Defense has dismissed the idea. What is not in doubt is the significant increase in the defense budget that will be needed both to pay for the Iraq war and the peacekeeping and nation-building duties that will follow. The Bush Administration has already submitted a supplemental budget request totaling \$80 billion, but freely admits that the total cost

of the Iraq venture remains unknown.¹³ Given the current weakness of the US and global economies, the financial burden of the Afghanistan and Iraq operations cannot be dismissed lightly.

Will the American people willingly bear the burdens of additional, largely unilateral operations such as Iraqi Freedom? The September 11 terrorist attacks certainly brought home to many Americans the dangers the US faced from abroad, and strengthened support for President Bush and his preemption strategy. But the main military combat phases in both Iraq and Afghanistan were short, and US casualties were very low. It remains to be seen how the American people will tolerate the open-ended peacekeeping and nation-building efforts now required in both countries. The last major long-term US combat and nation-building effort, the defense of South Vietnam, failed after public support for the war eroded.¹⁴ US Public opinion remains the center of gravity for any lengthy international commitments, and continued support in the face of growing resource demands and economic problems cannot be taken for granted. The upshot is that the United States could triumph in the combat phase of all of its military conflicts but fail to sustain the long-term effort needed to achieve success in the post-conflict periods. In other words, America could lose by winning.

Awe and Shock, or Aw, Shucks?

Pundits continue to debate the extent to which Iraqi forces were “shocked and awed” by the American offensive. Regardless of the ultimate answer, the military phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom was a tremendous success, taking Baghdad and deposing the regime of Saddam Hussein in less than a month. There is no doubt that US forces performed exceedingly well in a way that other countries would find it very difficult to match. The emphasis now, however, has

shifted to the much less glamorous and awe-inspiring tasks of pacification, peacekeeping, and nation building. These long-term missions do not depend on advanced weaponry or high technology, but rather on traditional “low-tech” skills such as police work and civil affairs. It is in precisely these areas that allied states can most effectively make a contribution.

The need for such assistance is great. The structure of the US Army in particular is such that the vast majority of combat support and civil affairs units is in the reserves rather than the active duty force. Recent deployments in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and now Iraq have imposed a tremendous strain on these units, which have experienced an operations tempo far in excess of what most of their personnel probably anticipated. Some units have been mobilized since shortly after the September 11 attacks, and the total number of reserve and National Guard personnel called up now exceeds 220,000.¹⁵ Such intensive use of reserve forces has raised concerns that significant numbers of reservists will choose to leave the service when their current enlistments expire. While no one can say for sure what will happen, it is safe to assume that the longer these deployments last, the greater will be the hardship experienced by reservists with civilian careers and the larger the exodus from the reserve force and National Guard.

This potential decline has serious implications for US force structure. More support and civil affairs units will need to be moved to the active forces to meet the demand for these critical, “high demand, low density” skills. Since the Secretary of Defense is attempting to keep a tight lid on increases in military manpower¹⁶, this implies a reduction in the numbers of other active duty forces. It is also a major consideration in the Secretary’s recently announced initiative to “civilianize” tens of thousands of jobs now performed by uniformed military personnel – a task fraught with political and managerial hazards.¹⁷

There is another way. An effective international coalition can supplement US forces in the all-important tasks of pacification and peacekeeping, providing financial as well as personnel support. The United Nations and other global institutions can contribute valuable assistance as well as a vital imprimatur of international legitimacy. The value of these coalition contributions has been demonstrated in several recent and on-going crises. In Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, US forces performed the majority of the actual combat missions, but were supplemented by substantial foreign contingents in the follow-on peacekeeping missions. Indeed, it is the deployment of additional forces from France and other NATO allies to the Balkans that has permitted the United States to draw down its own forces in the region to meet other pressing commitments.¹⁸ Operation Enduring Freedom offers another example, where US forces played (and continue to play) the leading combat role while allied units perform peacekeeping tasks and attempt to consolidate the shaky authority of the Karzai regime in Kabul.¹⁹ The Australian-led and US-supported intervention in East Timor is yet another recent instance where effective allied participation permitted the United States to economize on the use of its own forces. These cases illustrate the benefits of true coalition warfare across a wide spectrum of conflict situations. In all of them a significant share of the mundane, day-to-day peacekeeping mission, as opposed to the “shock and awe” of combat, is being undertaken by US allies. It is unreasonable to expect, however, that US allies will perform these duties in future intervention scenarios if they are not accommodated as part of an effective coalition from the outset.²⁰

Sharing the Burden:

It remains to be seen what portion of the Iraq pacification and rebuilding effort will be borne by other countries and international institutions. The “coalition of the willing” will be of little help (except, of course, for the British and Australians). Bickering continues at the United Nations and among NATO capitals.²¹ In the meantime the size of the US ground contingent continues to increase and the cost of the intervention to the American taxpayer continues to mount.²² The price of unilateral action will be very steep if the United States does not achieve an accommodation with its major allies and the United Nations for the rebuilding of Iraq. Future unilateral operations could be even more costly if the United States must shoulder the full burden of both the military conflict and the postwar reconstruction. Yet this is exactly what some influential voices have been advocating. Why should the United States, with its overwhelming military superiority, constrain its freedom of action by negotiating to build an effective, viable coalition or secure United Nations approval for the next conflict? Because, as this paper has argued, the US runs a serious risk of overcommitting its forces and weakening its overall combat power by continuing to launch unilateral military operations around the globe.

The failed US diplomatic efforts to secure approval for the deployment of the Fourth Infantry Division in eastern Turkey have been the subject of much criticism.²³ Regardless of the merits of their arguments, however, these critics are missing the key point. The real challenge for US policymakers is **not** getting the Fourth Infantry Division **into** Iraq, where events showed it was not necessary for the defeat of the Hussein regime, but rather getting it **out** again, rested and ready for its next mission. If Operation Iraqi Freedom had been conducted by an effective

international coalition, the US could be counting on allied or UN forces to relieve some of its own troops for the peacekeeping mission, as in Bosnia and Kosovo.

There are many good political and diplomatic reasons to fight in a coalition, but these are beyond the scope of a paper dealing with the military value of fighting with allies.²⁴ Coalition warfare is difficult and often frustrating. The cumbersome NATO procedures for approving targets during the Kosovo air campaign is but one example of the kind of compromises that fighting in an alliance often demands.²⁵ United Nations operations, such as the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) have an even more convoluted chain of command back to UN Headquarters in New York. Neither NATO nor the UN can be described as particularly efficient, but in the post-conflict period, their ability to relieve US units for peacekeeping and nation-building missions was of vital importance. Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom would have been much more difficult to implement if large US forces were still tied down in the Balkans on missions of undetermined duration.

Critics of coalition warfare frequently charge that America's traditional allies still do not comprehend the profound changes in American attitudes wrought by the September 11 attacks, and do not view potential international threats with the same degree of urgency that Americans do. But both NATO and the United Nations acted with alacrity to affirm support for the United States in the aftermath of September 11, and participated in the ensuing war on global terrorism. The multinational support has been vital to the success of this ongoing effort, and would be extremely useful for post-conflict operations in Iraq, even if the US had to accept some compromises and limitations on its actions there. After all, US military planners must still reckon with the remaining two members of the "Axis of Evil," North Korea and Iran, and a host of other potential threats from Colombia to Syria. It would be ironic (and tragic) if the United

States continued a policy of unilateral military interventions to preserve its freedom of action in dealing with perceived threats, only to be constrained later by a shortfall in manpower, funding, or popular will. Winston Churchill's advice on coalition warfare is accurate and prescient, and US leaders would do well to keep it in mind in the aftermath of Iraq's military defeat. "Fighting without allies" is a recipe for overcommitment and eventual disaster.

"We must not learn the wrong lessons from this campaign"

Brigadier General Mark Hertling, J-7,
commenting on Operation Iraqi Freedom

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¹ This does not include the "silent" members of the Coalition, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait, who provided the indispensable staging areas for US forces to conduct the attack. These countries did not, however, contribute military forces to the campaign and the first two played down their support for domestic political reasons. See also Peter Howard, "Confronting Iraq: US-European Relations" Washington Post.com, < http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/03/sp_world_howard031803.htm > 18 March 2003.

² Among them are former CIA Director James Woolsey, Department of Defense advisor Richard Perle, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. See James Fallows, "The Fifty-first State?" The Atlantic Monthly, November 2002, 23-24.

³ The caption is a take-off on the 1990's national military strategy of winning one major regional conflict while holding fast in a second until sufficient forces can be brought to bear to win that conflict as well - the "Win, Hold, Win" strategy.

⁴ For a list of the full "Coalition of the Willing" and their military contributions and expenditures see "The Coalition of the Willing," < <http://www.areporter.com/sys-tmpl/thecoalitionofthewilling> > downloaded April 7, 2003.

⁵ Paul Blustein, "US Plans for Iraqi Economy Hit Friction," The Washington Post, 11 April 2003, A-34

⁶ US military operations in the first Gulf War cost an estimated \$61 billion, much of which was reimbursed by financial contributions from Japan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. See Fallows, p. 21.

⁷ "Country Report - Bosnia and Herzegovina," Economist Intelligence Unit, < <http://db.eiu.com/reports> > 01 April 2003.

⁸ Colum Lynch, "Iraq Costs will Overwhelm US, UN Official Says," The Washington Post, 4 April 2003, A-24; and Blustein, A-34.

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¹² Rachel Bronson, "When Soldiers Become Cops," Foreign Affairs, November/December 2002, 124-126.

¹³ David Firestone, "It's Too Soon to Tell, But Expect the Final Tab to be High," New York Times, 4 April 2003, A1. The article quotes a Council on Foreign Relations estimate of \$20 billion per year as the cost of occupying Iraq with a force of 75,000 troops.

¹⁴ Stanley Karnow, Vietnam - A History, (New York: Viking Press, 1983) 18-26

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, "News Release" April 9, 2003. Many senior military officers have expressed concerns about the increasing demands placed on US active and reserve forces, most recently Brigadier General Mark Hertling (J-7) and Lt. Gen. John Riggs (Director Objective Force Task Force) in remarks to the National War College on April 21 and 22, respectively. See also Bronson, 125-126.

¹⁶ Ann Scott Tyson, "Wider Mission Stretches Military," The Christian Science Monitor, 2 May 2002.

¹⁷ Tom Shanker, "Rumsfeld Requests Power to Reorganize Services," New York Times, 14 April 2003, A1. The proposals envision a transfer of up to 300,000 jobs to the civilian sector, which would free up military personnel slots for other tasks, presumably including civil affairs and other "nation-building" missions.

¹⁸ Marc Champion, "Macedonia Peace Mission Unites Trans-Atlantic Rivals," Wall Street Journal, 15 April 2003 A1

¹⁹ Constant Brand, "NATO Approves Taking Command of Afghan Peacekeeping Mission," Associated Press, 16 April 2003.

²⁰ Bronson, 125-126.

²¹ Karen DeYoung, "US, UN in a Cautious Dance," The Washington Post, 12 April 2003, A29. This is a continuously evolving topic but no effective resolution has been reached as of this writing.

²² Bradley Graham, "Some Ships, Planes Likely to Start Homeward," The Washington Post, 13 April 2003, A37. While some air and naval units were being withdrawn from the Iraqi theater, the article points out that the buildup of ground forces was continuing, in order to deal with security and humanitarian relief missions. No date for the end of that mission has been set.

²³ See for example, Glenn Kessler and Philip Pan, "Missteps with Turkey Prove Costly," The Washington Post, 28 March 2003, A1

²⁴ International public opinion and legitimacy is one such benefit, and helps explain the Administration's constant references to the ad-hoc "Coalition of the Willing" in Iraq dispatches and communiques.

²⁵ Dana Priest, "United NATO Front was Divided Within," The Washington Post, 21 September 1999, A1 describes the difficulties of coalition warfare during the Kosovo campaign.